

Strategy Research Project

Developing Strategic Thinking Leaders in the U.S. Army

by

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United States Army War College
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

DEVELOPING STRATEGIC THINKING LEADERS IN THE U.S. ARMY

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ABSTRACT

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Due to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)¹ environment that Army leaders face at the strategic level, effective senior leaders require the ability to apply strategic thinking. Key elements that develop strategic thinking skills are undervalued in the current officer development timeline and a change in culture must occur in how the Army educates, promotes, and develops its Officer Corps. Without formally recognizing the value of developing strategic thinking officers, the Army will continue to fall short in effectively developing officers for the strategic level. Without innovation in how we develop strategic thinkers, the Officer Corps as a profession will be at risk. The Army must develop a strategy that changes the value and culture of how it develops its officer strategic thinking skills – skills necessary at all levels, but required at the senior level. This author proposes a strategy that focuses on three key areas of officer development that must be revamped: 1) PME and institutional education, 2) assignments, and 3) promotions and timelines. Changes in these three areas are necessary if the Army is to develop effective senior leaders that thrive in the uncertain and complex future.

DEVELOPING STRATEGIC THINKING LEADERS IN THE U.S. ARMY

Besides becoming multi-skilled, Army leaders have to balance the demands of diplomat and warrior. Acquiring these capabilities to succeed across the spectrum of conflicts is challenging, but critical.²

— *Field Manual 6-22, Army Leadership*

The United States Army War College (AWC), along with previous and current Army senior leaders, advocates that strategic thinking is a core competency required for the strategic level.³ Yet the Army provides no formal strategy that values the development of this critical cognitive skill. Learning to think strategically is not developed overnight, but takes years to develop. It takes education, immersion in different environments, experience, and practice in order to be a truly effective strategic thinker at the senior level; there needs to be a balance among broadening assignments, institutional education, and operational experience. Currently, the Army develops strategic thinking leaders by pure serendipity with mixed messages on assignment guidance and optional educational requirements. Only small portions of the Officer Corps receive any formal strategic thinking education at the AWC and that is after nearly 20 years of service. In addition, current Army promotion timelines value operational experience over self-study or Professional Military Education (PME) and often don't allow time for developmental broadening assignments.⁴ If this cognitive skill is so critical, why is it not a priority in Army officer development?

The future is uncertain and the next war will undoubtedly be in a complex environment. In order to develop the cognitive skills necessary for officers to thrive in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment and be able to overcome complex, “wicked” problems – or in other words, to think strategically, the

Army must be more effective in developing its Officer Corps. It must accept some risk in current readiness requirements in order to prepare our future senior officers of tomorrow. Both mid- and senior-level officers must develop into strategic thinkers who can not only direct combat operations, but also manage and shape the business side of the Army, understand and work effectively in diverse cultural contexts, and conduct governance and statesmanship with skill.⁵ The current system does not facilitate this. The Officer Professional Management System XXI (OPMS XXI) has served the Army well since 1996, but it must evolve to meet the requirements officers need in today's environment and the future.

Thus, the Army must provide a formal strategy to develop strategic thinking skills over the course of an officer's career that effectively prepares him/her for the senior level. This strategy will cause a change in values – a culture change in how the Army educates, promotes, and develops its Officer Corps. This paper recommends a strategy that adjusts three areas in Army officer development in order to develop strategic thinking leaders for the VUCA environment of 2030. These areas are: 1) Professional Military Education (PME) and institutional education, 2) assignments, and 3) promotion and timelines. Without adjustments in these areas, the Army will continue to fall short in developing effective strategic thinking leaders – where they are needed most, at the senior level.

What is Strategic Thinking and Why Do We Need It?

In 2005, then Secretary of the Army, Dr. Francis J. Harvey proclaimed that:

Army leaders in this century need to be pentathletes, multi-skilled leaders who can thrive in uncertain and complex operating environments...innovative and adaptive leaders who are expert in the art and science of the profession of arms. The Army needs leaders who are

decisive, innovative, adaptive, culturally astute, effective communicators and dedicated to lifelong learning.⁶

In other words, the Army needs strategic thinking leaders. Army leaders are quite efficient and effective at solving problems that are short-term, both at the tactical and operational level. However, more often, senior leaders come across highly complex problems in ambiguous environments that require more than experience and intuition to solve. These problems do not have simple solutions or yes/no answers. Instead they require a long-term view and have multiple second and third order effects inside and outside an entire organization. These problems require a different way of thinking – strategic thinking. This is not simply thinking of military strategy, but a deeper study of a problem. War College researchers assert, “Strategic thinking is the ability to make a creative and holistic synthesis of key factors affecting an organization and its environment in order to obtain sustainable competitive advantage and long-term success.”⁷ Strategic thinking is a method of *how* to think and it is not learned overnight. These skills must be developed over a course of a career in order to have the skills necessary at the senior level.

Before commissioning and throughout an officer’s career, the U.S. Army teaches the Army Problem Solving Process⁸ in order to build basic problem solving skills. The Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) closely parallels this process. These are proven, linear processes that are easily learned and greatly assist officers at the tactical and operational levels. But, as an officer becomes a senior leader at the Colonel level and above, he is dealing with problems that will require a different way of thinking than the linear approach of MDMP. Though there may be some similarities in the processes, thinking strategically is more like MDMP on steroids, or more appropriately, “MDMP’s

big brother”. Strategic thinking is the synthesis of thinking critically, systemically, creatively, and requires historical analysis.⁹ It requires feedback to adapt or learn from the interaction with the internal and external environment. It also requires one to be self aware of biases, tendencies, ethical influences, and assumptions that are often mental road blocks to thinking strategically and building an effective vision or strategy.¹⁰

To illustrate these elements of strategic thinking, we can look at the current budget constraints placed on the U.S. Army. General Odierno, the current U.S. Army Chief of Staff, has the task of cutting billions of dollars from the Army Budget over the next ten years. Good, and even great, programs will have to be cut and valid initiatives will potentially be unfunded. This problem is neither simple nor has a “right” answer. This problem cannot be solved by thinking instinctively or through MDMP. The outcome of this problem has tremendous implications across not only the Army, but our nation. This is a “wicked problem.”¹¹ This problem will not be “solved” in the traditional sense with one right answer, but rather managed in terms of the effects and impact.¹² Complex problems such as this one require less problem solving and more problem management.¹³ It takes time to develop this cognitive skill and that is why it must be developed and honed before reaching the strategic level.

Thinking Strategically Below the Strategic Level

There is no doubt that, in order to be effective, efficient, and successful, strategic thinking is required from senior leaders in the Army and other organizations. Captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels surely have faced situations that require strategic thinking or have made strategic impacts with their decisions (My Lai massacre, Abu Ghraib, LTC Hal Moore at LZ X-Ray in Viet Nam). Though not all problems require this

process, some problems are easily solved heuristically; a Rifle Platoon Leader would not be very effective if he had to think strategically about reacting to contact in battle. However, there are situations at the tactical and operational level that are complex where thinking strategically will help. Specifically, self awareness, creative thinking, and systems thinking can help officers below the strategic level in dealing with complex problems. In 2011, General Dempsey proclaimed that recent combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have proven that officers at all levels must work with a variety of joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational (JIIM) partners.¹⁴ This different operating environment that officers find themselves in today is different than previous generations. Today, and in the future, the environment will continue to demand officers that are effective strategic thinkers.

Think of the early days of summer 2003 in Operation Enduring Freedom. Picture a company commander placed in a town with all the leaders of the town gone. All heads of departments, infrastructure, utilities, and police are all gone. All others that worked in these areas have fled. A town of 10,000 people is demanding that he restore the previous department heads. The company commander is told by his higher that because they are Baathists, they cannot be reinstated despite their expertise. Having the skills to think strategically in this situation will no doubt help the commander. Multiply this problem by four and you can see the captain's battalion commander's problem with three other similar towns in a non-contiguous area of operation that covered over a 4,000 square kilometers. The problem that emerged required a new way of thinking. Some officers proved to be successful in this environment by thinking creatively, understanding the 2nd and 3rd order effects of outcomes, and using a critical

eye to understand the problem set. At the tactical and operational level, the situation required decentralization, operating within an intent, and required leaders to think strategically.

Surely the problems they faced in the above example are less complex than at the senior level, but the bottom line here is that they are complex problems where thinking strategically will produce more positive results. Having the skills to think strategically will help officers at the tactical and operational level work through these problems and ultimately, allow them to leverage those skills and experiences when they become a senior leader.

One doesn't magically become a strategic thinker once he reaches the strategic level, but rather education, experience, and self-study over the course of a career develop strategic thinking skills. In addressing the problem of leader development, General Dempsey stated that developing key attributes such as gaining a variety of experiences, obtaining education that enables creative and critical thinking in a complex, ambiguous and uncertain environment cannot be developed over night or a year or two at school, but it is a career long process.¹⁵ In the *Patton Mind*, Roger Nye concludes that:

Patton had taught himself again and again that the battlefield would always be unclear to the commander, who must make decisions without perfect information. He had also learned from his study of the past that the future would present largely unforeseeable and unpredictable situations and that the commander who responds quickly with creative solution is the one who prevails. This was perhaps his greatest lesson for future commanders: prepare for the unknown by studying how others in the past have coped with the unforeseeable and the unpredictable.¹⁶

Patton's example summarizes the issues discussed thus far: strategic thinking skills are important; they take time to develop over the course of a career; and strategic thinking skills are useful at the tactical and operational level.

Not Effectively Producing Strategic Thinkers

In 2009, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) introduced the Leader Development Strategy for a 21st Century Army that understood the issues mentioned thus far. Prescribing a balance of training, education, and experience, it clearly articulated that, "we cannot wait to develop leaders capable of operating at the strategic level until they are about to be assigned there" and that "we are not building an adequate "bench" of senior leaders for the future."¹⁷ As General Dempsey admitted in 2011, the Army has a leader development problem:

I will tell anyone who will listen that we have a leader development problem in the Army, I like the problem we have! We know that our leaders know how to fight and have demonstrated great courage, selflessness, versatility and resilience. Those are great traits on which to build, and they are traits on which we will never compromise. On the other hand, it is true that the tactical demands of fighting two wars have consumed us as a profession over the past decade. Our focus has naturally and correctly been oriented on winning the wars we're in. As the demand to support these wars is reduced, we need to be ready to add to the knowledge, skills, and attributes of our brilliant tactical leaders and prepare them to operate at the strategic level.....strategic leaders must be inquisitive and opened minded.....they must think critically and be capable of developing creative solutions to complex problems. They must be historically minded; that is they must be able to see and articulate issues in historical context.....they must be able to navigate successfully in ethical "gray zones", where absolutes may be elusive. Similarly, they must be comfortable with ambiguity and able to provide advice and make decision with less, not more information. While all leaders need these qualities, the complexity of problems will increase over the course of an officer's career and require strategic leaders to develop sophistication of thought.¹⁸

In the last 10 years the Army has been operating in VUCA environments in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The VUCA nature of counter-insurgency operations (COIN)

operations facilitates and debatably requires successful leaders to think strategically.

But besides the on-the-job counterinsurgency experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, what has the Army done to purposely develop strategic thinking leaders?

Many senior leaders often talk about the importance of obtaining “broadening experiences” outside the operational Army such as advanced civil education or serving in a JIIM position in order to develop strategic thinking skills. These experiences expose leaders to different organizations, people, and perspectives that help develop strategic thinking skills. General Maxwell “Mad Max” Thurman, a true visionary who is responsible for the professional all-volunteer army we have today, advocated that officers need to spend time away from the day-to-day Army and that learning tactics and leadership alone were not enough for success at the senior level.¹⁹ However, not much more than encouragement has been done to develop these necessary skills.

There are opportunities for advanced civil schooling, JIIM positions, and teaching at institutions, but the Army’s culture has not changed enough to value those developmental skills over operational experience. Officers often postpone schooling in favor of an operational assignment or combat tour to be more competitive for promotion. Army schools are being undervalued. As General (R) Robert Scales notes in his book, *Too Busy to Learn*, there is a cultural bias towards action rather than reflection. The Army is “circling the X” in deferring maintenance on officer development.²⁰ The promotion system simply does not value these broadening assignments that develop leaders and facilitate strategic thinking. In 2009, Lieutenant General (R) David Barno testified to congress that the current officer management system identifies “expert tacticians for promotion and then expects them to magically recreate themselves as

strategic leaders.”²¹ He also noted that the management policies are nearly exclusively biased toward tactical level and command; those pursuing specialization risk upward mobility.²²

Institutionally, the only formal PME on strategic thinking is a two-week block of instruction at the AWC followed by a three-week study on strategic leadership. But since not all officers attend AWC nor are these classes uniform across the other service colleges, it does not provide all officers the educational framework to develop strategic thinking skills. Some officers elect alternatives to the AWC such as fellowships or attendance at a sister-service college. Though these alternatives are broadening, very little, if any, strategic thinking framework is discussed. By allowing alternatives to its institutions, the Army undervalues the importance and significance of its own PME in lieu of a broadening experience. There must be a balance.

In interviews with 37 top general officers under the condition of anonymity, Renny McPherson asked what helped them become strategic thinkers.²³ They responded that the most beneficial experiences were sustained international experience, civilian graduate education, and taking on special opportunities out of the military mainstream; all were the very ones that they felt discouraged from pursuing.²⁴ Several general officers personify this atypical developmental path by going against the established officer career progression.

General Petreaus provides a good example. Though he did not attend a senior service college (SSC), he did attend the Combined Arms General Staff College (CGSC), earned Master’s in Public Administration and Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) degrees from Princeton, was an assistant professor at the United States Military

Academy at West Point (USMA), and completed a Fellowship at Georgetown University. As an aide de camp for Major General John Galvin, Petreaus received sound advice. Galvin told him to think beyond the foxhole about history and strategy, about relations between military and their civilian bosses, and about the next war. He told him to attend graduate school to meet civilians with different experiences and ideas.²⁵ Abazaïd, Casey, and Chiarelli followed similar advice, and arguably developed strategic thinking skills that ultimately led to their success – all counter to the officer developmental timeline.

The problem is how do you make the leap to thinking strategically after 20+ years of thinking tactically and operationally. There are dozens of senior leaders that have not or will not think differently. The fact is that current officer development timelines limit options for officers to pursue institutional expertise. General Chiarelli spent nearly seven years away from the operational army earning a master's degree and teaching at West Point. Though told by the personnel department that his career was over because of it, he obviously persevered.²⁶ Today's rigid officer promotion timelines and high value of operational assignments would prevent an officer from being developed and promoted like General Chiarelli.

As the Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall realized at the age of 58 that he “must become an expert in a whole new set of skills.”²⁷ Thinking strategically takes time and experience. This cannot be started at the 20 year mark. It is comparable to starting an IRA early versus starting one late. If a 2nd lieutenant starts an IRA at the age of 22, by the time he reaches 65, it will have accrued enormous wealth and be fully prepared for retirement. However, if another officer starts his IRA when he

is a colonel, twenty years later than the 2nd lieutenant, the colonel's IRA will not be nearly as mature and ready for retirement as the 2nd lieutenant's. The message is simple: the Army must start developing strategic thinking skills early without sacrificing tactical and operational development.

A Way to Develop Strategic Thinkers

To formulate a system to develop strategic thinkers, a cultural shift is required in the Army. Developing strategic thinking officers is not merely solved by providing a class on how to think; it is more of how an officer is developed over his career. Developing strategic thinking is a process that takes time and exposure to multiple stimuli and multiple environments. A strategic thinker is a *learner* vice a *knower*.²⁸

In addition to formal education, developing strategic thinking requires time to think, time to self study, and time to reflect. Allowing this is currently outside the norm of officer development. Many successful officers ignored the cultural norm and direction from their personnel officers and attended grad school: Petraeus, Dempsey, Ward, Chiarelli, and McCrystal.²⁹ Their exposure to different institutions, various points of view, and the time to self-study, all outside the typical Army environment arguably provided them increased mental development. Surely they gained knowledge, but more importantly, they gained a time to think critically on issues and broaden their horizons outside the Army culture and its typical way of thinking. They also met and worked with people outside the Army culture, professors and students provided a variety of points of view. Becoming a student again, adapting to a new environment, and exposure to new ideas all help to develop elements of strategic thinking.³⁰

Much can be taken by the example of these pioneers, but officer developmental timelines have shortened since their time. Requiring minimal time in grade for promotion, instead of requiring key developmental certifications at each rank creates numbers, not qualified officers. Along with the Army's heavy favor of combat experience over education in the last 10 years, following these flag officers' examples may be easier said than done. Current Army senior leaders have already recognized this imbalance and the need to increase the value of education and broadening assignments. General Cone, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) remarked in July of this year that, "At some point, brilliant, well experienced tactical leaders have to transition to become operational or even strategic leaders and thinkers. It's very hard to do that if they have not attended the schools that refine and broaden their thinking."³¹

An officer's career is both a leadership and thinking laboratory - enabled to try things out, make mistakes, strengthen skills, and enjoy the journey along the way.³² The Army must change how it develops officers in order to build effective senior leaders. There are three specific areas to address: 1) PME and institutional education, 2) assignments, and 3) promotions and timelines.

PME and Institutional Education. The Army must train for certainty and educate for uncertainty.³³ In addition to a strategic thinking module at AWC, the Army should incorporate modules at both the Captains Career Course and at Command and General Staff College (CGSC)/ILE. Starting with module 1 (MOD 1) at the Captain's Career Course (CCC) level, officers should learn the fundamental framework of strategic thinking. Specifically, they should understand critical, creative, and systems thinking.

This exposes young officers early on how to look at complex problems and uncertain environments they will undoubtedly be finding themselves facing. In addition, self awareness, and historical culture perspectives should also be understood. To facilitate this, the Meyers-Briggs Personality Test should be administered here and at subsequent levels of officer education to assist officers' awareness of their tendencies and biases. All of this could be done in five days or less and should not take away from the focus of the course. Still living in the tactical and operational world, these captains will still need their heuristics and to continue to develop their basic problem solving skills through the MDMP process. However, they will need to begin to become familiar with thinking strategically for complex problems and begin to develop these skills.

At the Intermediate Education Level (ILE), MOD II strategic thinking instruction provides a more in-depth module similar to what is currently done at the AWC. This would be 10 three-hour blocks of instruction at CGSC that incorporates the practical application of strategic thinking through various scenarios and historical vignettes. It is a simple fact that majors and lieutenant colonels will be in VUCA environments and also will be advising senior leaders on wicked problems. In CGSC, the reinforcement of strategic thinking and sharing scenarios help to develop this necessary skill.

Coupled with strategic thinking instruction at CGSC should be a revamp of the daily schedule there. A similar model to that of the AWC should be followed with four hours of morning classroom facilitation and then time provided for thinking, reflecting, and research. The Army must consider looking at ILE differently and not feel the need to fill each day with blocks of instruction to be cost effective. Instead, it should focus on creating an environment that facilitates self study, reading, reflecting, and developing

thinking skills. Providing little time to think and reflect hurts the cognitive skills that need to be developed. A different approach is needed to develop future senior leaders.

At the SSC level at AWC, MOD III strategic thinking instruction should incorporate practical exercises on problems faced at the three and four star-level. Since those selected for SSC have the option of attending sister-service SSC or choosing a fellowship in lieu of attending resident SSC, there should be a Joint initiative amongst all of the SSCs to incorporate MOD III into their respective course. Those selected for fellowships should receive MOD III during their primer/orientation course at AWC before starting their fellowship. Though students graduating from the AWC earn a master's degree, officers need to develop their thinking and analytical skills associated with graduate education much earlier in their career – when they are younger and education will have its biggest impact.³⁴

The Army must incorporate graduate education earlier in the career of officers identified with senior leader potential. The current G3 ACS program only sends 412 officers (mostly captains and majors) to graduate education despite having slots for 1400.³⁵ The number has been capped at 412 since 1994. It is based on funding and the ability to man competing operational assignments. Despite senior officers heavily encouraging junior officers to go this route, the Army has not increased funding or is willing to accept risk in operational assignments. Graduate school education develops critical and creative thinking skills that can be applied in their career and required at the senior level. Previous successful senior leaders mentioned earlier have proven this. Waiting until AWC to get these skills is too late in the development of senior leaders. The Army must increase the number of ACS slots proportional to the acceptable

reduced fill in assignments in other areas. The risk is necessary in order to allow the best officers – future senior leaders – to meet this requirement.³⁶

Assignments. If the Army continues to over-value operational assignments, the Army will not be effective in developing leaders for the senior level. The Army needs to challenge its officers by requiring a balance of operational assignments/experience with education and broadening assignments. These complement one another. Much like general officers require a joint assignment as mandated by Goldwater-Nichols, there should be other broadening requirements that are mandated to prepare future strategic leaders. Despite this requirement often being waived in recent years,³⁷ the Army must regain emphasis on these invaluable broadening assignments. The Army currently has 3482 joint active duty billets and only 70% are being filled.³⁸ That leaves nearly 1000 available billets! There are enough joint positions to support more officers gaining this experience, but it will come at the cost of not manning the force in other areas. Joint requirements should also be expanded to include the full spectrum of JIIM assignments. The top 50% of the officer corps must obtain a broadening assignment of at least 18-24 months³⁹ in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, or multinational assignment. Strong consideration should also be given to developmental assignments at the Department of the Army (DA) level since it provides understanding of how the Army functions.

To further the breadth of JIIM assignments, Field grade assignments in Joint Interagency Task Forces (joint), Transition Teams (multinational), Provincial Reconstruction Teams (multinational) and Ranger Regiment (Joint) should fall into these assignments as well. The Army officer must have a better balance of operational, educational, and broadening assignments in order to prepare officers for the senior

level. To make all of these changes work, adjustments must be made in how the Army certifies and promotes its officers.

Promotions and Timelines. Additional key developmental requirements should be mandated at each level in order to develop and certify officers for promotion. The current system lacks this necessary requirement, promoting primarily off of time and undervaluing promotions. Promotion rates to major and lieutenant colonel are grotesquely over 95%. The Army is making it painfully obvious that it values numbers over quality – efficiency over effectiveness. Currently, the only statutory requirement to be promoted to major is three years time in grade. To make lieutenant colonel you only need ILE equivalent and three years time in grade. To make colonel, only three years time in grade. The current system is based on quotas, time in grade, and performance – not the quality of development or certification for the next level. Emplacing key developmental (KD) requirements at each level that develop and qualify officers for promotion will replace this flaw. Promotion boards should not consider for promotion those officers that do not meet their PME and KD assignments and are not promoted until they do.

For example, after company command, captains will be required to do one of the “big three”; ACS, JIIM, or TRADOC assignment. At the major level, officers still require current branch specific KD positions but also should be required to complete one of the big three with the additional option of serving in a Pentagon assignment. Post battalion command lieutenant colonels must attend SSC or fellowship and fill a JIIM assignment afterwards if not selected for brigade command (post brigade command assignment should be JIIM). These additional KD requirements certify officers at each level on the

way to be a strategic leader. By the time an officer is looked at for brigadier general, he will have at least two JIIM assignments (one being joint), ACS, SSC/fellowship and therefore be more prepared for the current environment.

An officer attending ACS or being an instructor at an institution should not be punished, promotion-wise, when compared to his peers that are in operational assignments. For example, officers that currently choose to teach at USMA, attend graduate school for two years than teach for two to three years.⁴⁰ These officers rush back to the operational army to obtain a KD position as a major, while their first look to lieutenant colonel is on-going. Meanwhile, their peers that stayed in the operational Army already have had two KD positions and multiple officer evaluation reports (OER), to their one. This has been hard to overcome despite several attempts by senior leaders to guide promotion boards and mentor officers down that path. The Army is entrenched in this culture of officer development that is designed to fill officer positions from a human resource perspective rather than developing quality officers for the right positions. Mandating broadening assignments and education at each level qualifies and certifies officers for promotion – numbers and timelines should no longer be the primary determining factors. Since broadening assignments and ACS are no longer a choice, but necessary developmental requirements, boards will be forced to treat them equal to operational assignments.

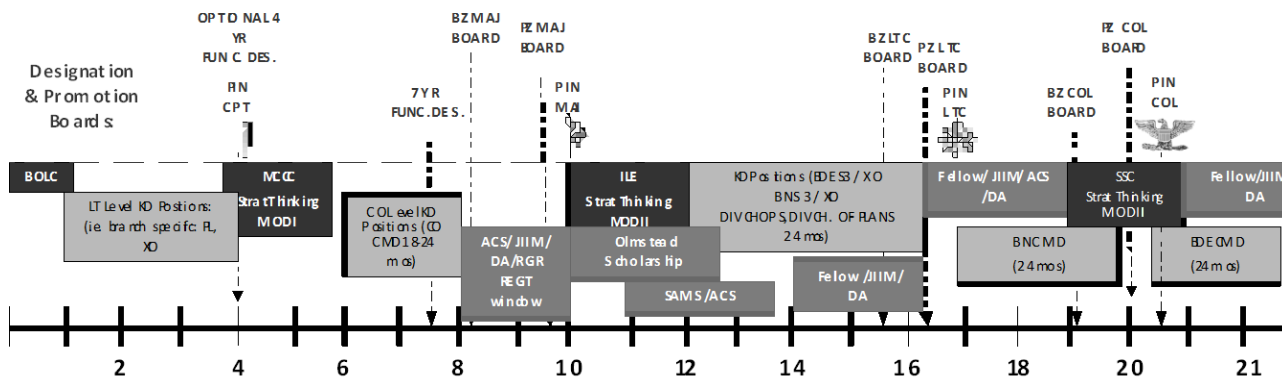
Standing in the Way of Progress

In order to develop these three areas, the Army must accept initial risk in operational readiness by potentially not fully manning operational requirements. Those in personnel resourcing may cringe to hear this since this may create a shortage of

officers at various levels. But as the war in Iraq comes to a close and Army commitments begin to lower in Afghanistan, the time is right to re-emphasize quality over quantity. This is necessary for a long-term investment in the Army officer profession. General Dempsey said, “The development of our future leaders is not a “tax” on the institution but an “investment” in our future.”⁴¹ The Army must place the “development” back into officer developmental timelines. Changing the culture amidst fighting two wars would be a significant challenge and is likely the reason why the Army has not taken measures to solve the problem. However, this must be done to facilitate both higher learning and gaining operational experience for its competitive officers and not just a few that bravely go against the grain. The new developmental timeline must value effectiveness over efficiency.

Figure one provides a proposed officer development timeline through colonel that outlines the strategy discussed thus far. The strategy removes the “either/or” approach that the Army uses in regards to broadening vs. operational assignments. It includes windows at the company and field grade levels to accomplish ACS, and broadening assignments. With KD requirements for promotion at each level along with providing windows to achieve these requirements, the Army will capitalize on both educational and broadening education – both necessary to develop strategic thinking.

Proposed Officer Professional Development



Adjustments Made:

- Promotion based mostly on developmental requirements rather than time
- KD position requirements at each level
- ACS requirement
- Joint assignment requirement expanded to JIIM

Opportunities to Meet Requirements:

- 2 windows for ACS/masters qualification (prior 0-6)
- 4 windows for JIIM qualification

Figure 1. A strategy to improve the development of strategic thinking officers.

The Profession at Stake

The ideas brought forth in this recommended model are not new. Despite senior leaders supporting these ideas, few changes have occurred since the advent of the Goldwater - Nichols Act in 1986 and the OPMS XXI in 1996. Changing the Army culture of officer development may be difficult to overcome but will be necessary in order to better develop strategic thinking leaders. With the imposing budget cuts, waning commitments overseas, and reduction of the force being imminent, the time to change is now. This change is vital to the Army profession and failure to innovate in this regard would be an egregious mistake in preparing officers for the strategic level environment. Army Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno, in his opening days as the new service chief, proclaimed that, "The strength of our Nation is our Army; the strength of our Army

is our Soldiers; the strength of our Soldiers is our Families. That is what makes us *Army Strong*.⁴² Truly a systems approach to looking at the Army, his statement highlights the critical interdependence of the Nation and its army. If we are to maintain that strength, we must develop strategic thinking officers that can meet that enormous responsibility despite the complex and uncertain environments of future warfare. Though there are risks in maintaining current officer strength in operational assignments (mainly due to Iraq and Afghanistan), the hazard of keeping the status quo will jeopardize the profession in the long run. It will lead to inadequately skilled senior leaders as the future becomes more volatile and uncertain. As the Army goes, so goes the nation. If this is true, now more than ever, we need to develop officers that can lead both the Army and in effect, our nation, through an uncertain future.

This paper outlined a way of better developing strategic thinking officers for that future through a better balance of, education, broadening assignments and operational experience. Developing strategic thinking skills requires the Army to get away from officer career paths that are primarily based on time and operational assignments and instead focus on key development and certification throughout an officer's career. The Army must accept risk in operational assignments in order to invest in the future of the officer corps. It must address changes in PME, assignments, and how we certify officers in order to better develop strategic thinkers. As we begin to contract the size of the force, now is the right time to implement this plan. Strategic thinking development takes time. Unlike corporations or current business models, the Army cannot simply bring in talent from outside the Army to fill its senior leadership; warrior skills and culture take years to develop.⁴³ It must begin early in an officer's career along with exposure to

a variety of environments inside and outside the Army. It must develop senior leaders that are equipped to make thoughtful solutions resulting in timely decisions.⁴⁴

Maintaining the status quo of officer development will place the Officer Corps, the Army, and our Nation at risk in the VUCA environment of the future. *Prudens futuri!*

Endnotes

¹ T. O. Jacobs, *Strategic Leadership: The Competitive Edge*, (Washington, D.C.: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, July 2009), 13.

² Field Manual 6-22 *Army Leadership* (Washington D.C., Headquarters Department of the Army, October 2006), 8-6.

³ CAPT Douglas E. Waters, "A Framework and Approach for Understanding Strategic Thinking and Developing Strategic Thinkers in Strategic Thinking," *Strategic Thinking Selected Readings Core Curriculum* (Carlisle, PA: Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, United States Army War College, July 2011), 13. Also discussed in Baraka A. Salmoni, Jessica Hart, Renny McPherson, and Aidan Kirby Winn, "Growing Strategic Leaders for Future Conflict," *Parameters* 40, no. 1 (2010), 73. In addition, GEN Dempsey discussed the importance of strategic thinking elements in Armed Forces Journal referenced later in this paper.

⁴ Michael Meese and Samuel Calkins, "Back to the Future: Transforming the Army Officer Development System," *The Forum* 4, no. 1 (2006), 11.

⁵ Meese and Calkins, "Back to the Future: Transforming the Army Officer Development System," 9.

⁶ Francis J. Harvey, Secretary of the Army address to the Command General Staff College Graduation 2005, quoted in U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile*, Field Manual 6-22 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, October 2006), 7-1.

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⁸ Field Manual 5-0 *The Operations Process* (Washington D.C., Headquarters Department of the Army, 26 March 2010), 2-3.

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¹⁰ Stephen Gerras, "Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking," in *Strategic Leadership The Generals Art*, eds Mark Grandstaff and Georgia Sorenson (Vienna; VA, Management Concepts, Inc., 2009), 50-51.

¹¹ Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Weber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," in *Policy Sciences* 4, (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, 1973), 160.

¹² Mark Grandstaff, "Strategic Leaders and the Uses of History," in *Strategic Leadership The Generals Art*, eds Mark Grandstaff and Georgia Sorenson (Vienna; VA, Management Concepts, Inc., 2009), 96.

¹³ Strategic Leadership Primer 3rd edition, ed Stephen J. Gerras, (Carlisle PA: Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, United States Army War College, 2010), 30.

¹⁴ Martin E. Dempsey, "Building Critical Thinkers: Leader Development Must Be The Army's Top Priority," *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2011), 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Roger H. Nye, "The Patton Mind; The professional Development of an Extraordinary Leader", (Garden City: NY, Avery Publishing Group Inc., 1993), 156.

¹⁷ A Leader Development Strategy for a 21st Century Army, TRADOC 25 November 2009.

¹⁸ Dempsey, "Building Critical Thinkers: Leader Development Must Be The Army's Top Priority, 1.

¹⁹ David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army* (NY: Crown Publishers, 2009), 48.

²⁰ Robert H. Scales, "Too Busy to Learn," *Proceedings Magazine* 136 (February 2010): 1.

²¹ Scott A. Carpenter, "The Joint Officer: A Professional Specialist", *Joint Forces Quarterly* (October 2011), 127.

²² Ibid.

²³ Renny Mcpherson, "The Next Petraeus", *Boston Globe*, September 26, 2010.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*, 43.

²⁶ Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*, 58.

²⁷ George C. Marshall, quoted in Strategic Leadership Primer 3rd edition, ed Stephan J. Gerras , (Carlisle: PA, Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, United States Army War College, 2010), 1.

²⁸ Jeanne M. Liedtka, "Strategic thinking: Can it be Taught?", 124.

²⁹ Robert H. Scales, "Too Busy to Learn," 2.

³⁰ Dempsey, "Building Critical Thinkers: Leader Development Must Be The Army's Top Priority," 2.

³¹ GEN Robert W. Cone, *Laying the Groundwork for the Army of 2020*, Landpower essay given to the Association of the United States Army's Combined Arms Maneuver Symposium and Exposition, (Kansas City, MO 26, July 2011), 3.

³² Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard business Press, 2009), 44.

³³ COL (R) John Bonin, Army War College faculty, interview by author, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 9 November, 2011.

³⁴ James Jay Carafano and Alane Kochems, Rethinking Professional Military Education

³⁵ AR 621-1 28 August 2007 Training of Military Personnel at Civilian Institutions, pg 3
Email from Elaine Freeman Leader Development Division, Officer Division Directorate of Military Personnel Management

³⁶ The Olmstead Scholarship is another excellent competitive program that immerses an officer in a foreign country for two years to learn the language, culture, and earn a Master's degree. Programs such as these combine a broadening assignment with educational development. GEN Abazaid is a noteworthy example of this program and was the first officer in the program to go to the middle-east.

³⁷ In recent years, due to on-going operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Joint requirement has been waived at the Secretary of Defense level for some general officers.

³⁸ COL Reese Turner, U.S. Army, Division Chief, Officer Professional Management Division, electronic mail with author, 9 November 2011.

³⁹ The current policy mandates the length of time filling a Joint assignment is at least 36 months or 22 months and 1 day with waiver for those officers selected for battalion or brigade command.

⁴⁰ This program should be optional for officers to cut the utilization tour from three years to two in order to facilitate returning to fill KD positions. In addition, these officers should attend the shorter 3-month ILE instead of the 10-month ILE in order to rapidly return them to the operational Army.

⁴¹ Dempsey, "Building Critical Thinkers: Leader Development Must Be The Army's Top Priority," 3.

⁴² U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno, "Initial Thoughts," memorandum for the U.S. Army, Washington D.C. September 7, 2011.

⁴³ Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Accessing Talent: The Foundation of a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2010), 36.

⁴⁴ Gerras, *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 29.